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San Francisco's Queer Diaspora and the Gay Middle Eastern Refugee/Asylee

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Abstract

In recent years, millions of refugees have migrated across the globe fleeing persecution, in search of better lives. Among these refugees are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) individuals who are escaping maltreatment for their sexual orientation. At the time of writing, there were 76 countries with laws imposing harsh sanctions against same sex intimacy, varying from fines, imprisonment, violence, and even death. Because of their unique situations, these refugees and asylum seekers are doubly marginalized as forced migrants and sexual minorities. This study investigates how LGBTI refugees, asylum seekers, and asylees navigate their identity through the interactions in the queer diaspora of San Francisco's Castro District. Identity is produced and reproduced through social interaction. This study's main goal was to investigate how social interactions, embedded in the lived experiences of LGBTI refugees/asylees post-asylum, created and shaped meaning specific to their identity. More specifically, the current study looked at social interactions using communication, mediated and interpersonal, to negotiate identity. A focused ethnography was conducted in the queer diaspora of San Francisco's Castro neighborhood. Self-identifying gay males from the Middle East, who now reside in San Francisco's Bay Area were interviewed and observed. In a post-asylum context, media were used to find other LGBTIs in the queer diaspora, however not used to build relationships. Interpersonal communication was utilized more in the queer diaspora to foster relationships, acculturate, and shape identity. Intersectionality, marginalization, and power come together to shape the identities of the LGBTI refugees/asylees.

Contributor Note

Dr. Rodriguez is an Assistant Professor of Digital Studies. Rodriguez has 10 years professional radio experience, a BA in Communication from the University of Texas of the Permian Basin, a Masters of Journalism and Mass Communication with a Concentration in Public Relations from Kent State University, and a Ph.D. from Texas Tech University. His research converges in media effects at a societal level; specifically, LGBTQ and Hispanic populations, pop culture, identity, hegemonic masculinity and radio/television broadcasting.

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A queer diaspora is created out of existential angst (Fortier 2002) and one cannot ignore the implicit issues of power and persecution. It is a liminal space formed out of pain and torment (Butler 2012), located between leaving and arriving (Eng 2007). Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, and intersex individuals (LGBTIs) are at the center of issues of power, persecution, and existential angst. They are the primary focus of the current study. Judith Butler's (2012) queer perspective of diaspora focuses on more than just how diaspora functions; it places emphasis on how people in the diaspora became diasporic. Butler highlights the individual's experience of diaspora as anchored in grief, loss, instability, violence, displacement, injustice, reconciliation, and the search for solidarity and coexisting. She argues that countries create refugees specifically to maintain and sustain homogeneity.

Due to persecution (violence and even death), once LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers flee their homelands, there is no turning back (Sinfield 2000). 'They are exiled and estranged; there is no longer a home to which they can return' (Fortier 2002). For these individuals, home is a place you arrive to, instead of a place from which you came (Eng 1997). There is a 'homing desire' experienced by these individuals, 'the desire to feel at home achieved by physically or symbolically (re)constituting spaces which provide some kind of ontological security in the context of migration' (Brah 1996: 180). The longing for their homeland creates a tension that affects the identities of these estranged queer migrants. Also, most LGBTI migrants do not arrive in their host country to immediately begin assimilation; rather they continue to

experience engagements with heteronormative regimes of power (Manalansan 2003).

Diasporas are addressed in two themes, according to Fortier (2002). The first is through scattering and diversity and the second is through exile and home. Diaspora is seen as a place of disjuncture that has to do with the scattering of diverse populations around the world. Diaporas are exoticized and glorified by some Western LGBTIs (Watney 2005). Diaspora has been communicated in the media as a synonym for travel and leisure. Puar (1994) criticizes this approach and maintains that while it's true, it isn't right. Puar points out that scholars like Watney neglect the fact that bodies do not just 'travel to', but are also 'traveled upon'. White, affluent, males can often move freely between countries and through diasporas. It is not the same for some LGBTIs of color or women in general. There is a hegemonic power structure that cannot be ignored when we speak of diaspora (Fortier 2002).

The second theme of exile and home asks us to broaden our thinking about diaspora from the narrow focus of a connection to a geographic homeland. Diaspora, according to Fortier (2002), cannot only be defined in terms of a traumatic uprooting. Home is something that forced-migrants have left behind. The homeland is a place of heteronormative structure that cannot be returned to for most. 'Home is a place you get to, not the place you came from. Instead of dispersing, we assemble' (Sinfield 2000: 103). In the case of LGBTIs, there is only arrival. Diaspora for most is a place of home. It's a place



where, as Hall (1990) defines it, diasporic groups can create a hybridity of sorts. They can create an identity through their own customs and culture, many of which include music and art. The media help keep diasporic individuals connected to other places around the world, but can also help create and maintain a collective identity. For queer diaspora, there is an even greater need for collective forces to be shaped and molded. As Butler (2012) points out, individuals in the diaspora are unwilling and unchosen, but are unchosen together. Thus, a queer diaspora helps provide a communal and safe environment for LGBTIs who are persecuted amid other LGBTIs.

Diasporas were traditionally framed as produced by conscious minded-individuals who migrated out of economic need (Clifford 1994), but is now, after additional research, regarded as the movement of people as the result of push factors that include persecution, genocide, hate crimes, poverty, and war. A queer diaspora is created not by ethnic markers, but by a shared sentiment of discrimination, oppression, exile, and angst (Fortier 2002). It is innately queer, precarious, and dispossessed (Butler 2012), as is the LGBTI. Consistent with the identity of an LGBTI, a diaspora is continually being deconstructed and reimagined (Mandaville 2003). I argue there is an instinctive bond between the two. Most LGBTI migrants, both forced and voluntary, cannot settle with their countrymen and remain out (Luibheid & Cantú 2005). Even though a queer diaspora is not defined solely in ethnic terms, it is important to note that some LGBTIs of color experience an intersectionality of oppression once they are in a host country – they experience racism in addition to homophobia.

The identities of those living within the diasporic space are shaped by the context of history and the present, such as social, cultural, temporal and spatial factors (Karim 2004). The current study stresses the phenomenological experiences of gay refugees/asylees living in the U.S. as restructured inequalities, opportunities, and occurrences (Manalansan 2003). How do gay refugees/asylees negotiate a post-asylum identity in the queer diaspora of San Francisco?

Focused Ethnography in the Queer Diaspora

The current study employs a focused ethnography during a long weekend in San Francisco's queer diaspora. Focused ethnography is a distinctive kind of sociological ethnography which complements and does not directly oppose conventional ethnography. Knoblauch states the strategy is 'widely used particularly in the investigation of research fields specific to contemporary society, which is socially and culturally highly differentiated and fragmented' (Knoblauch 2005: para. 2). The method is 'typified by short-term or absent field visits, an interest in a specific research question, a researcher with insider or background knowledge of the cultural group, and intensive methods of data collection and recording, such as video or audio-taping' (Wall 2015: para. 10).

Focused ethnography places emphasis on communicative activities and experiences of communication (Knoblauch 2005). While in San Francisco, I worked with the Organization for Refuge, Asylum & Migration (ORAM) and attended a fundraiser for a local group named *Southwest Asian & North African Bay Area Queers* (SWANABAQ). My

informant, Reza, was a member and introduced me to other individuals in the group, all of whom were gay refugees/asylees from the Middle East (Hassan, Fathi, and Omari), with the exception of one (Oleksander).

San Francisco and the Gay Refugee/Asylee

San Francisco, as well as the Bay Area at large, provides LGBTIs an environment of self-expression with minimal judgment and persecution. For many refugees/asylees, the city has been a beacon of queerness since their adolescent years. San Francisco is openly gay and non-apologetic in its queerness. You can be whoever you want to be and rarely does anyone take issue with it. San Francisco's citizens are inoculated to the strange, the weird, and the queer. This setting provides many LGBTI refugees/asylees the freedom to escape from the virtual world and enter the tangible, physical world. They now were able to freely move about and experiment with sex, relationships, and other mundane activities that were denied to them in their host country.

Beaux is not a large club, but can hold around 200 people. There are three bars, the biggest of which is in the middle of the first floor of the club. There is a lounge section between the main bar and the street windows with two large boxes in between the couches. There are poles rising from the boxes to the ceiling of the club. A second floor surrounds the perimeter of the first floor in a balcony of sorts. Chairs and tables line the second-floor balcony. The ORAM table is positioned on the dance floor, to the right of the main bar and next to the DJ booth. To the left of the main bar are more chairs and tables. This is a prime

location and all of the patrons can view the table from anywhere in the bar. Also, all of the foot traffic is between the dance floor and the DJ booth. There's a beer bust going on (\$10 for all the Bud Light you can drink from 2:00 to 6:00 p.m.), so there is a steady stream of people in the bar. The music is American pop and all sung in English. People bob their heads up and down as they chat with others. Everyone seems comfortable and is having a good time.

ORAM was invited to set up a table and provide information about the programs they offered. I was asked to man the table and interact with members and patrons of the bar. After a briefing on the programs, I take over as sole representative for the organization and man the table. People walk up and ask about the various services and projects, one of which is a poster project. The organization is asking for refugees to pose for a picture of just the back of his/her head, then give a one-line blurb about persecution in their homeland. Entries are aggregated for a larger poster to be distributed to organizations helping LGBTI refugees. The second poster is accompanied by a sign-up sheet. The organization is asking for LGBTI refugees who would like to be on their speaker board and speak at various events. Placing a face and a story with the greater narrative of LGBTI migration humanizes the effort. It lends a sense of affect that that helps foster empathy and encourages others to help support refugees and asylum seekers. The last project collects donations to buy BIM gift cards. BIM is a grocery store chain in Turkey. For most refugees, Turkey is the midpoint in the migration journey to asylum. Often, many are stuck in Turkey awaiting resettlement. The asylum process can be long and the refugees, while waiting in Turkey, cannot work and

have few means to support themselves. ORAM wants to give them food cards to help feed them during this liminal stage. Marwan¹, a refugee from Syria and an employee of ORAM whom I interviewed earlier in my trip, is present for the event. He offers some insight on Turkey to a fellow refugee: 'In Turkey, homosexual acts have been legal since the times of the Ottoman Empire'. Turkey legally decriminalized homosexuality in 1858 and currently offers asylum to LGBTIs fleeing from persecution² (FSRN 2016). He continues: 'Many LGBTI refugees from the MENA region try to make it to Turkey first before reaching a country of asylum in the West. It is also why many NGOs and immigration/asylum lawyers have offices in Turkey'. Marwan happens to have a cameraman following him around for the fundraiser (as well as for a speaking event he has after the fundraiser at the University of California San Francisco). The director of the event asks the cameraman to please refrain from filming the other refugees in the room. Many of the refugees are extremely sensitive to recordings and do not want to be on camera. Some are still awaiting asylum and do not want any footage of them inside a gay club. They would like to remain anonymous.

This desire for anonymity is relevant in three ways. First and foremost, it demonstrates that these individuals have

¹ Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the participants. Pseudonyms were researched online to match the individual with his respective country and culture. The main informant was contacted to verify that the names used in the study were culturally sound and correctly represented each participant's nationality.

² Although same-sex intimacy is decriminalized in Turkey, LGBTIs in the country do not have constitutional protection from discrimination and perpetrators of violent crimes toward the marginalized group typically receive lenient sentences (FSRN 2016).

not fully internalized their identity as 'gay', 'queer', 'homosexual', or anything in the LGBTI spectrum. Their desire to remain anonymous may stem from their insecurity with their sexuality and how they will be perceived by others. They do not want to be categorized in negative manners and, in fact, they may have internalized some of the negative categorizations into their current identity. They are still negotiating who they are, and are not yet ready to fully embrace any type of LGBTI identity.

Second, it demonstrates the reluctance of refugees to engage in any kind of recorded activities or interviews. It's extremely difficult to find willing participants for academic research. I, like many researchers, rely heavily on informants I already know. I generally utilize snowball sampling. For the current study, I found participants through LGBTI-focused NGOs. ORAM placed me front and center of this fundraising event and added a level of credibility to my research by vouching for me.

The third reason anonymity is relevant is because it plays a major role in the advocacy of LGBTI and refugee human rights. Marwan tells me that the media is littered not only with people speaking out against LGBTIs, but also against minorities like Muslims and Mexicans. He states he doesn't see a counter-argument: 'I wish LGBTI refugees would speak up and say something, but they don't. So I will'. Marwan hopes his speeches and interviews will raise awareness about the issue and create dialogue that instigates social change. The cameraman makes Marwan aware of the time and they excuse themselves from the event. We say our goodbyes and he leaves me alone to man the table. By this time there are a few more people in the room.

I'm alone at the table, and for a brief moment traffic is slow, so I have time to notice the refugees/asylees interacting in the room. They are laughing and hugging, some are drinking, and all having a genuinely good time. Two refugees walk up to me and one hugs me. He says, 'hi Nate'. I replied, 'Hi, nice to meet you'. His smile disappears. I just stare at him. It takes me a couple of seconds to realize it is Reza. He's a refugee from Iran that I interviewed the day before. I apologize – yesterday he wore glasses and today he had contacts, which made him look different. Reza and I had really good chemistry during our interview and he promised to spread the word about my need for interviewees. Had he taken offense to me not recognizing him, Reza may not have provided me with additional contacts. He introduces me to another refugee named Oleksander (Olek for short) from the Ukraine. Reza then points to the 'refugee heads' poster and lets me know that he is the first head pictured. He exclaims, 'I want to help however I can'. Reza and the other refugee then begin speaking in private.

Another gentleman approaches and asks for me to explain the entire series of posters. I oblige and he donates money to the BIM card campaign. He explains he isn't a refugee, or Middle Eastern, but supports the cause. He is friends with many of the SWANABAQ members and wanted to show them he supported their march in the parade. This process reoccurs for the remainder of the evening. I speak to many refugees/asylees and explain the posters on the table. I give them free buttons and speak to them about their personal plights. I can tell that many of them are uneasy: they don't want to be recorded and express their concern for anonymity.

A group of Iraqi refugees held a whole conversation in front of me about the asylum process and how participating in various endeavors may jeopardize their chances to get an interview for asylum. One refugee begs, 'Please, no camera, I cannot, I cannot'. They explained to me that they cannot hold any jobs, be seen in any deviant manners (such as drinking, consuming drugs, or engaging in illegal activities), and cannot be stirring up trouble before they receive asylum. One states, 'I must obtain lawyer and apply for asylum, I then await interview with government'.

The second Iraqi refugee stated he's not comfortable talking to anyone and his English isn't that great. I look to the third and he quickly advises me that he's straight and only there for support. His girlfriend is at a Filipino event and he's just passing the time at the bar. He then asks, 'Do you know where to buy weed?' I say 'no' and laugh a little nervously; and then they all laugh. He came back to me a couple of times throughout the event to let me know the status of his search. He walked up and down the street all night and couldn't find any marijuana. Before he left he stated I was a cool guy and would be out that night with friends if I wanted something to do. He and his other friends became comfortable with me, to the point where illegal activities were discussed in my presence. San Francisco, compared to other cities in the U.S., has a relaxed policy on possession of marijuana, so that also played a role in their comfort level when speaking of the subject.

One of the individuals who came by the table was an asylum lawyer. She introduced herself by her profession, but never stated her name. She donated money to the BIM card campaign and then explained to me that she worked

mainly with asylees. She explained the difference between refugees and asylees, which was basically the active process of requesting asylum. An individual with refugee status could stay in the country, however had many restrictions on working and mobility between countries. An asylee could often receive work permits and living permits while awaiting full asylum status. She worked with numerous NGOs and offered her services to many LGBTI asylees for free. We were interrupted by a dramatic increase in the volume of the music. She wished me luck and rejoined the party.

Another individual I met, Bashar, is a former refugee who now worked in Sacramento. He told me that most LGBTI refugees were on gay mobile apps like Grindr, Scruff, and GROWLr. He told me that would be a great way to reach LGBTI refugees/asylees. The last couple of conversations I had with people were difficult due to the high volume of the music. By five o'clock the party was in full swing and many individuals were drinking and dancing. The table was pushed further and further to the back of the club to accommodate the increase in bodies. A Lebanese belly dancer came out and performed for the crowd. She was heterosexual, but stated she supported the LGBTI community. She danced around to Arabic music and the crowd went wild. A birthday cake was then brought out to celebrate the birthday of five members, including Reza. The club then began to play Arabic dance music and everyone was dancing and drinking. It was at this time that I realized that the tabling was no longer effective. I took down the posters, collected the money, and said my goodbyes.

Although the LGBTIs were forced to sever their physical links to their homeland, they brought with them the 'mythical and

linguistic allusions to their ancestral territory, which they invoke in nostalgic reminiscences' (Karim 2004: 396). The collective singing, dancing, language, and cultural cuisine of their countries of origin are familiar to the group. The group's nostalgic celebration transcends cultural artifacts and enters into a space of ritual commemoration. Their culture is still part of their identity and extremely salient when they are gathered together. It is through interaction with others who share common cultural characteristics that the LGBTIs are able to celebrate the meaning of those cultural symbols – symbols that have significant value for them.

The individuals in SWANABAQ constituted a collectivity that was constituted in knowledge, behavior, and interaction within a social institution (Jenkins 2002). The social institution in this scenario is the queer diaspora of the Castro neighborhood in San Francisco. The members of SWANABAQ identified themselves as a group based on their collective characteristics of ethnicity, culture, and queerness. They were explicitly conscious of their membership and demonstrated identification through shared language, dance, food and cultural customs. None of the members acknowledged that the group was recognized officially in any capacity. However, the fact that they recognized themselves as a collectivity makes them one nonetheless. I, as an outsider, witnessed their behavior and interaction and categorized them; writing about the collectivity also reaffirms and recognizes that categorization.

It wasn't long after I departed that I received a text message from Olek (I had given him a business card). He texted, 'I enjoyed meeting you, join us at the clubs to celebrate Reza'. They were barhopping

in the Castro and celebrating Reza's birthday. I knew he could introduce me to other LGBTI refugees/asylees – I jumped at the opportunity.

A Night in the Castro

The night was cool and moist, and the Castro was alive with lights, music, and the sounds of people. The streets of the Castro are lined with clubs, restaurants, and other small businesses. I met the small group on the outside patio of a club called *Melt*. They stated they enjoyed outdoor patios because they could smoke and take in the bay breeze. I spoke with Olek for a while about his journey from the Ukraine, his country and the underground nightlife that he enjoyed there. 'In the Ukraine, you cannot be openly gay. So the gays meet online and at underground clubs, like discos and parties'. Olek explained that he went to school in order to obtain enough education to apply to a U.S. university. He then applied for asylum once he was in the United States. Olek introduced me to Hareem, or Ri-Ri as he went by in San Francisco. Hareem was his best friend and lived in the same apartment complex.

They met in New York City and instantly became best friends. Hareem was from Iraq and also fled his country due to his sexual orientation. Hareem's real name was Hassan, but mentioned that he wanted to start his transition to a woman and had adopted a new name in order to match his 'new gender identity in his new life'. Since he hadn't officially begun his transition, he still used male pronouns. By adopting a traditionally female name, Hareem was establishing a public gender identity that signaled to others how he identified, in turn

encouraging ways in which to categorize him. Also, by providing me with the option of calling him Ri-Ri, he was also demonstrating that he had internalized a portion of the American culture in his identity.

Neither Olek nor Hareem was drinking alcohol, however they liked to frequent clubs and bars. The three of us spent about an hour just talking about the gay lifestyle, nightlife, and joking about the people around us. Reza later joined us and brought along his friend, Mike. I remember Mike from the previous event at *Club Beaux*. I recall hearing him tell Reza, 'Arabs are sexy', and he wanted to see how they were in bed. Mike is an Anglo-American male in his late 40s and stated he was there to support the 'Arabs'. The group didn't seem to mind the label and often used it themselves in casual conversation with Mike.

I need to discuss Mike briefly. As the night progressed, he continuously attempted to grab the genitalia of the men he spoke to. Every time he spoke to any of the Middle Eastern LGBTIs, he would touch their shoulder with one hand and then reach for their genitalia with the other. I noticed that Reza and Olek were deeply upset with his behavior. In fact, Olek would often roll his eyes at Mike and move away. At one point of the night, when walking between bars, Mike was stopped by another Anglo-American gay man. Mike told the other guy, 'I hang out with Arabs now. They're hot. I wanna know if they fuck as good as they look'. I believe that this behavior signaled that Mike exoticized the Middle Eastern men and categorized them as sexual objects. His primary intent was to sleep with at least one of them. At the end of the night, around 2:00 a.m., Mike asked if anyone wanted to go home with him and was met with silence.

Mike's attitude and behavior toward the group is important to note. His categorizations of the 'Arabs' as sexualized objects were noticed by the group. This is another categorization that the LGBTIs had to negotiate in a post-asylum setting. As he spoke about them with the other White Americans, the categorization was reinforced. Identity is variable and vulnerable and 'deviant' identities may become internalized as a consequence if an individual is apprehensive of being publically categorized as such (Jenkins 1994). It was evident that the other men did not want to be considered mere objects of sexual desire. Reza and Olek, specifically, internalized this categorization and rejected it. This was evident by their gestures and facial expressions, although neither explicitly told him to stop. It is important to note that although rejected, this external definition of their social group is still an identification, however as a focus of denial (Jenkins 2000). Although they rejected this categorization and refused to internalize it, the categorization still exists.

As the night progressed, we went to a couple of other gay bars in the Castro. None of the members of the small group drank alcohol, but they did smoke cigarettes, which is why they enjoyed bars that had patios. I noticed that everywhere we went Reza was greeted with hugs by several people. I quickly learned that Reza was a central figure in the LGBTI Middle Eastern community living in San Francisco. He introduced me to a lot of different refugees; I strongly believe that by gaining his trust I was able to get him to advocate for my presence in the group. Reza gave me a level of credibility which was essential. I feel when others saw me hanging out with Reza, they let their defenses down a

little. This is an extremely marginalized population and a particularly sensitive group (they are both gay and refugees). As demonstrated by my interactions at *Club Beaux*, there are a lot of refugees who are still scared to be out or want to completely separate themselves from the past. Halfway through the night Reza introduced me to an Egyptian refugee named Omari, who sometimes used the name Omar. I noticed some of the Middle Eastern refugees I encountered used Americanized versions of their name, for example, Hareem's use of RiRi.

Omari hung out with us for a while and often stayed next to me to talk about my personal life. He and I exchanged some details about one another and I made him fully aware that I was observing the group for my research. Omari told me about the many different clubs in the Castro and pointed out the ones he liked, 'I am not into slow music or Arabic music'. He didn't dance at *Club Beaux* because he wasn't into the 'slow flow'. Omari liked trance and wanted to go to a dance club. Mike, Reza, Olek, and Hareem were not into trance and liked the patio bars. Omari received a text from a friend who was going to a dance club and excused himself from the small group. Before he left he mentioned, 'Tomorrow I'm going to *The Eagle* for the beer bust, I'll see you there?' *The Eagle* was a bear bar and not in the Castro, I agreed. He told me to look him up on the gay mobile app *GROWLr* – I said I would, and he left.

Toward the end of the night, Olek and Hareem felt a little more comfortable with me. They spoke of sexual exploration in both their homeland and in San Francisco. They spoke of their feelings of fear and their feelings of hope. I think as we walked and talked, more intimate details emerged. Hareem

opened up about his pre-asylum life in Iraq. He is 22 and has only been in the United States for about a year. 'I always knew I was attracted to men', he stated. Hareem was introduced to male-male sex through his cousins. He explained that he had slept with many of his first and second cousins and was always the receiving partner, 'I did this and my cousins told me not to tell. They still wanted to be masculine and weren't gay'. It was just sex, play among men, and wasn't internalized as a gay identity.

This issue of masculinity being tied to the role he performs in sexual intercourse is something that is evident among various cultures, including those in the Middle East (Cantú 2009; Massad 2002; Murray 1997; Peña 2007). Hareem's cousins were able to partake in fulfilling a sexual desire, as long as they were the top/active role, without assuming a homosexual identity. This is similar to findings in Saudi Arabian men who still have sex with men, but do not consider themselves homosexual (Labi, 2007). What's particularly interesting is that Hareem is considering transitioning into a female. His repeated role as the receptive/submissive partner is a performance of that specific gender role.

For Hareem, his role as a bottom also served as a performance that reinforced his identity as a gay male. He said, 'I had seen movies and porn and knew I was gay'. He never felt violated or forced, he willingly had sex. 'I liked it'. Hareem stated he is sexually attracted to a very specific type of man. He said his ideal lover is 'masculine, big shoulders, generally older, and acted straight'. Although he made it clear he was attracted to masculine men, his current lover is effeminate like him. Hareem stated 'I love him and will never cheat'. He admired men from afar, but would

never cheat or have an open relationship. He liked the idea of monogamy and being in a relationship. Hareem fled Iraq because he could never openly be in a same-sex relationship without being persecuted. He stated, 'Here in San Francisco I can be gay and show my partner love in public'.

Everything we spoke about was organic and volunteered. I was able to see how the LGBTI refugees interacted with one another. At times they would start speaking in Arabic and then quickly remember that Olek and I were present, and began speaking in English. They spoke of common Middle Eastern customs, other refugees, and regularly referenced Arabic-specific concepts. Reza said he enjoyed being around other LGBTIs from the Middle East, because they could use the same language, enjoy the same customs, food, and music. SWANABAQ provided them with a great outlet to meet others who were going through the same issues. They bonded at picnics, clubs, and other social events. They shared not only a common culture, but also a common struggle. They knew first-hand the plights of Middle Eastern gay men, and in that they found solidarity.

This discussion reminded me of Judith Butler and her statement on repression in the diaspora: 'we are all, in this sense, the unchosen but we are nevertheless unchosen together' (Butler 2012: 25). The individuals I met had their own collectivity in which they interacted, shaped meaning, and negotiated their identities. Here was a gay diaspora, in the heart of San Francisco where people from all over the world gather in order to feel accepted. Within this larger landscape of homosexuals are smaller subgroups like the one I was witnessing.

There was a sense of inclusion and belonging amongst these Middle Eastern gay refugees, an unspoken understanding of a common struggle. It's important to keep cultural and linguistic identities in mind when researching such groups. Their conversations, of course, were not limited to Arabic or Middle Eastern content. They spoke about horoscopes and music. They joked about sex clubs and pornography. To my surprise, there was not much talk about primetime television, films, or online content. The conversations were mostly about their life experiences.

Important to note is that these conversations happened within LGBTI circles in the queer diaspora. The group expressed little interest in interacting with their broader cultural diaspora that included non-LGBTI members. Many heterosexuals from their native countries carried over homophobia into traditional diasporic spaces. The group categorized non-LGBTIs as unaccepting, hurtful, and not able to change in their ideologies. The group also assumed that the non-LGBTIs categorized the gay men in pejorative and deviant ways as well.

Olek was the only refugee in the small group that was not of Middle Eastern descent. Olek was from the Ukraine and spoke Russian. He was fair-skinned and spoke English very well. He had a septum ring and was stylishly dressed. Most people didn't even realize he was from the Ukraine. He and Hareem had met in New York City and lived together there, along with several other people, in one apartment. He said, 'I always wanted to go to San Francisco because it's gay-friendly and accepting here'. Olek expressed that he liked to explore his sexuality. Throughout the night, he would compare himself to Hareem's hopeless romantic nature. Olek was promiscuous

and was not into monogamy – nothing about a relationship appealed to him. He wanted to be free, frequently chatted on gay dating apps, and enjoyed casual hook ups. He was unapologetic about his lifestyle and wanted to explore what was so long denied to him in his past.

The clubs in the Castro provided a lively background to our conversations, while simultaneously allowing me to observe the LGBTI refugees in their post-asylum atmosphere. Enjoying such an evening out with queer friends was something that they were not able to do in their native countries. The freedom to move about and perform their identities in public, and with one another, offered an opportunity to negotiate who they were. The small group of LGBTI refugees/asylees had demonstrated that they had internalized various parts of the Castro, and ultimately American and gay culture, into their identities. They negotiated the categorizations of others, by either embracing or rejecting them, and together these internal identifications and external categorizations shaped their social identities (Jenkins 2000) in the queer diaspora of the Castro.

The Eagle and the Bears

On Sunday afternoon (the day after my Castro club crawl), I headed to *The Eagle*, which is located in San Francisco's Folsom district, to meet Omari. The location was extremely different from the Castro. It was rugged, dirty, and exuded a strong masculine ethos. The club, as well as the clientele, matched that ethos. *The Eagle* is a bear³ bar in every form and

³ The term bear emerged in the gay male community during the 1980s and was made popular in the San Francisco bear culture

fashion. Today, like every Sunday at *The Eagle*, there was a beer bust. For \$10 one could drink all the draft Bud Light they wanted from 3:00 until 7:00 p.m. I showed my ID at the door and entered the main bar area. There was a heavy smell of smoke and, although it was still sunlight outside, the bar was very dim and dark. There were quite a few people inside the bar. I walked around a bit and then headed outside onto the patio. There were even more people outside. It was hard to maneuver through the crowd, but I pushed my way through and made a full circle.

There was an outside bar, an elevated platform, and a makeshift dancefloor in the middle. Trees lined the back of the patio and created a soft shade on the north side of the bar. I texted Omari and he gave me his location – under the big tree on the patio. I was just there, but with so many people it was hard to decipher who was who. Plus, everyone there fit the stereotypical ‘bear’ type: burly men, overweight or muscled up, and beards. There were beards everywhere! Omari was an exception. He had a baby face with three dimples (one on each cheek and one on his chin). He had a bald head and absolutely no facial hair. As I walked toward the biggest tree, he finally appeared. He stood out from the rest of the crowd.

Omari greeted me with a hug. I noticed he had on shorts, a Captain America t-shirt, and tennis shoes. He also had on a beer bust bracelet and was drinking beer from a clear plastic cup. He asked how my journey was and I told him about the walk and the homeless people. Omari

(Manley, Levitt, & Mosher 2007). Bears are usually described by their physical attributes such as body hair, beards, stocky build, hyper masculine dress, and resemble heterosexual men more than the typical gay stereotypes (Wright 1997).

stated, ‘So many homeless people here in San Francisco and most of them aren’t even that poor’. The cost of living is so high in San Francisco that a lot of people live on the streets. Omari lived in a house with three other roommates and his portion of the rent was still \$700, which he thought was cheap. He owned a vehicle, but he didn’t like to drive in the city. He left it parked on the street in front of his house and used either public transportation or Uber/Lyft. San Francisco has a well-structured transportation system. We made small talk about the great weather, the patrons of the bar, and the dating scene in San Francisco. Omari told me he wanted a monogamous relationship, however, there were not too many gay men that wanted the same. He was often attracted to guys who weren’t attracted to him. He described his type as the ‘daddy-type, older and bearded’.

It was difficult to carry a streamlined conversation due to the loud music and the constant interruption of other drunk patrons trying to squeeze between us as they maneuvered around the patio. *The Eagle* was the counterpart to the clubs in the Castro. Here everyone came specifically to drink, it was a beer bust after all. Even Omari, who refused to drink the night before when he was with his Arabic and Middle Eastern friends, was fully partaking in the beer bust. The music was also much louder and the crowd much more rowdy. The atmosphere was filled with testosterone, hair, and the stench of beer.

Omari stood closer to me and yelled directly into my ear to cut through the noise and managed to share a few things in between interruptions. Omari shouted he was from Egypt and the youngest of three children. ‘My father really wanted me to be masculine and get a masculine

job', he said. Omari's father still didn't know he was gay and Omari wasn't quite ready to tell him. Omari used Facebook, like all of the refugees I spoke to, and really didn't post too much about his personal life, much less his sexual orientation. His family members were among his friends on Facebook.

Omari did mention that he posted a supportive comment in July when the U.S. legalized same-sex marriage; 'My father called and asked me why I was supporting the gays'. Omari defended his actions and tried to convince his father that there was nothing wrong with being gay, but his argument fell upon deaf ears. Omari still wasn't sure if he would come out to his family. He did say, 'I know I'm happy and I want to live in San Francisco forever'. I questioned the appeal of the city and he replied it had always been a beacon of queer lifestyle. 'In Egypt, I would search online for pictures and videos about the city, I knew it was the only place I wanted to live', he exclaimed. This demonstrates how mediated communication is used to shape categorizations of places and not just individuals. He said he and all of the people in Egypt used the Internet and cell phone apps to learn about Western culture. Omari used digital media specifically to find out about the gay lifestyle outside of Egypt. He would also use Facebook to reach other gay people. They would chat and private message, but Egypt didn't foster a friendly environment to meet in person.

In the middle of our conversation, a bearded man in his mid-forties approached us. He was another Egyptian and they greeted each other with hugs. They began to speak in Arabic for about three minutes before the friend asked, 'Do you speak Arabic?' When I answered 'no', he looked surprised. He said, 'You

look Middle Eastern'. He apologized and then introduced himself as Ammon. The two continued their conversation in English. They made small talk about last night's adventures and then the friend dismissed himself. Omari told me, 'Ammon is the only Middle Eastern man I have ever been attracted to since I moved to San Francisco'. In spite of this, Ammon made it clear that Omari was not his type. Omari commented they both had 'daddy issues' and preferred males older than themselves. Omari pouted and then excused himself to grab a BBQ sandwich, which was free with the beer bust bracelet. I stayed on the elevated platform on the patio and observed the crowd.

Everyone looked like they were having a great time. The weather was cool, but not cold and the sun was setting. There was music, but no dancing. There wasn't any room to dance, it was too crowded. The men all drank and smoked and talked with one another and appeared to be enjoying themselves. I saw a few of them coupling together and then starting to make out. Omari returned and ate his sandwich. The beer bust was winding down and patrons began to leave. Omari was ready to go home and so was I; we walked out of the bar together then parted ways.

Insider/Outsider

The implications for this focused ethnography were distinguished by my ability to not only be allowed access into the discursive spaces of these LGBTI refugees/asylees, but also the opportunity to participate within them, within limits. While I was able to participate and observe these spaces, I am not a part of the culture. Being gay definitely facilitated in my acceptance

into the group settings, however I am still Latino, a U.S. citizen, and from Texas. As other ethnographers have documented in their research (Conquergood 1992, 1994; Willis 1997), as both a participant and an observer, I am both insider and outsider. Trust had to be earned at a much more demanding concentration so that I could be granted access to not only the collective space, but also to the meanings and nuances shaped and maintained by the individuals within them.

I was allowed to see two performances of identity, or front stages/regions as Goffman (1959) labels it. One performance was the SWANABAQ event where the LGBTIs were able to congregate with other LGBTIs of their culture. They spoke Arabic, danced to Arabic music, and ate Arabic cuisine. It was a space that belonged to them and their Middle Eastern culture, separate from the rest of the Castro clubs and citizens. The Castro itself, as well as *The Eagle*, served as the other front region, a space where their language and song was kept hidden in a deliberate attempt to acculturate with the rest of the queers in San Francisco. Here, the LGBTI refugees/asylees performed an identity that was negotiated in relation to the club, its patrons, and the queer diaspora as a social institution. The common identity in both spaces was that of being queer. It's also important to note that neither of the front regions serve as a reality or a main performance (Goffman 1959). Both are real to the LGBTIs and both are part of their identity. They must negotiate both spaces and integrate them into their overall identity. They are queer, they are of Middle Eastern, and they are refugees/asylees living in the United States.

It is within these social fields that the LGBTIs interact with others on a personal basis. They gravitate toward other individuals with whom they share commonalities, but also those with whom they feel comfortable. The queers in the Castro, *The Eagle*, and especially those involved with SWANABAQ, treated the LGBTIs with respect and kindness. These categorizations of the LGBTIs were internalized and resulted in positive identification with the groups they chose to associate in. Identification is affected by not only how others define us, but also how they treat us (Jenkins 2000). Also evident was the interaction between the Middle Eastern LGBTI refugees and the queers in San Francisco as a collective, in the Castro generally and at *The Eagle* specifically. Jenkins' assertion that 'contact between groups may produce incremental and mutual shifts in identification' was evident in the language and behaviors of the LGBTI refugees/asylees (Jenkins 2000: 21).

Also evident in the interactions was how the LGBTIs used both verbal and nonverbal communicative forms to construct a post-asylum culture for themselves. They transitioned back and forth from Arabic to English depending on their social context and the topic under discussion. While in the SWANABAQ meetings, they primarily utilized Arabic; however, in the Castro clubs, they spoke English. The clothing they chose to wear was non-traditional attire, even at the cultural event. They dressed like others in the Castro, or in Omari's case, like other bears. Speaking English and wearing American apparel demonstrate how the LGBTIs embodied their social environment.

Conducting a focused ethnography provided me not only the opportunity to observe interpersonal communication

among the LGBTI refugee/asylees in the queer diaspora, but also afforded me the opportunity to interact with them myself. Participation allowed me to compare and contrast the various social fields that this group interacts within and provided me with more nuanced exchanges from which to gather my data. Identity is

produced and reproduced through social interaction (Jenkins 1994), and it is within these interactions that gay refugees/asylees from the living in San Francisco's queer diaspora are able to negotiate a post-asylum way of life.

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